

Review Articles

FACT INTO FICTION: CONRAD'S CREATIVE PROCESS

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Conrad's Western World. By Norman Sherry. Cambridge University Press, 1971. Pp. xiv, 455.

In a little-known letter to the *New York Times* in 1901, Conrad made explicit the belief in fundamental conflict that underlies all his best fiction: "the only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous—so full of hope. They exist! And this is the only fundamental truth of fiction".¹ It was this belief in the conflict of values, of men within themselves and with one another, and of political necessities, that led Conrad to create his characteristic, open-ended novels.

Conrad's personal life was also marked by conflict, both intellectual and emotional. He held simultaneously, for example, a number of apparently contradictory social and political attitudes: he often expressed the idea of "loneliness [as] . . . a hard and absolute condition of existence",² but he believed also in the existence and necessity of human solidarity. His attitudes towards revolutionaries were typical of the complexity and contradictions of his political thought: at one moment he was disturbed by the "menace of fanaticism and intolerance"³ inherent in revolutionaries, while at another moment he supported the valid struggle and the self-sacrifice of revolutionaries in Spain and Poland. Yet again, while he remained suspicious of any change brought about by revolutions, he insisted on the necessity for a wholly destructive revolution in Russia.

The pattern of conflict in his personal relationships (particularly those involving his sexual identity) is equally striking. His later novels, such as *The Arrow of Gold*, contain unmistakable suggestions of various sexual perversions; while at each crisis in his personal life, such as his marriage and the birth of his sons, his behaviour provides bizarre evidence of his conflicting feelings.

This presence of basic conflict in both Conrad's personal life as well as in his novels complicates any account of the relationship between his life and his art. His first biographer, Jean-Aubry, postulated a simple relationship between the facts and their fictional counterparts, suggesting that Conrad's work primarily reflected the experiences of his life. Since then, more detailed scholarship and a more critical (sometimes psychoanalytical) approach to Conrad's personality have shown

how simplistic and sentimental such a picture is. Most recently, Norman Sherry⁴ has examined the complex transformation of fact into fiction in three of Conrad's major works, *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo*, and *The Secret Agent*, together with their associated short stories.

In particular, Professor Sherry's account of the sources for *The Secret Agent* reveals exactly how certain of Conrad's personal and political conflicts influenced the writing of the novel. Conrad himself always liked to take credit for an intuitive rather than a factual knowledge of the anarchists whom he so blatantly caricatures in the novel. In reality, as Professor Sherry demonstrates, Conrad was very familiar indeed with the anarchist press, from whom he derived many of the specific details of attitude, character, and action in the novel. The version of the Greenwich explosion which he uses for the novel, for example, is not that based on details available through the legitimate press, but is instead derived from certain material in *The Anarchist* newspaper and in a pamphlet, "The Greenwich Mystery", written by the anarchist David Nicoll. It is from Nicoll, Professor Sherry suggests, that Conrad acquired the conception of the over-all intention of the planned explosion, which was to discredit the anarchists in England. From Nicoll, too, came details about the personalities and relationships of the characters involved: the idea of the secret agent's adoring brother-in-law who is used as a tool for, and accidentally killed by, the explosion in the park is common to both Nicoll's pamphlet and Conrad's novel, while Verloc's character appears to be derived in part from Nicoll's portrayal of the anarchist Samuels' respectable marriage and external appearance as an agitator when in fact he is a police spy.

Professor Sherry also illustrates the means by which Conrad uses accurate and precise factual details to compose his exaggerated picture of anarchism. Nearly all of the important traits and experiences of the anarchists in *The Secret Agent* seem to be based on historical examples with which Conrad was apparently very familiar. The range of his references to these sources is both wide and discriminating, as may be seen from the details that make up the composite character of Michaelis. For each of Michaelis' characteristics and experiences Conrad takes specific details from Russian, Irish, and American anarchist/socialist/revolutionary figures, and combines them into an extreme configuration of the pacifist revolutionary. His name, for example, seems to come from that of a Richard Michaelis who wrote a pamphlet on Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, while his obesity is more than reminiscent of Bakunin. The incidents leading to Michaelis' arrest are clearly based on a well-known Fenian incident involving the Manchester Martyrs, while his experiences on being released from prison are closely related to those of the Fenian Michael Davitt. Finally, his ideas combine the over-all themes of Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* with some specific imagery from Bellamy's *Looking Backward*.

Likewise, the other anarchists in *The Secret Agent* appear grotesques not because they are extensions or exaggerations of any particular revolutionary but

rather because Conrad has created each of them, in a composite way, from various actual but extreme examples of contemporary anarchism. The crudeness of their characters and statements is thus not the result of either ignorance or of direct exaggeration on Conrad's part but is rather the effect of Conrad's ingenious and knowledgeable selection of factual details that omit any trace of humanity. The anarchists' responses to the problems involved in revolution, for example, are un-subtle, unbalanced, and unworkable; but every one of their ideas—even at times the actual wording of them—reflects exactly the more extreme responses to the political situation being made by the more fanatic anarchists in such journals as *Commonweal*, *Alarm*, and *The Torch*.

The anarchist politics of *The Secret Agent*, then, are based on the selection of detailed actual facts which together compose a repellent picture. But what of the material for the more personal, human part of the story? From what, for example, does Conrad create the character of Winnie? Professor Sherry suggests that Conrad probably derived certain details about the marriage of the Verlocs from that of the Kriegers, with whom he lived for some years in London. The primary source of the character of Winnie, however, lay in Conrad's own marriage, as Professor Sherry illustrates rather briefly. The most striking elements of Winnie's character are her "diversity of dreadful silences"⁵ and her belief that "things do not stand much looking into";⁶ both of these characteristics bear an unmistakable resemblance to Jessie Conrad's own habit of keeping total silence in any highly emotional or distressing situation. There is also a distinct similarity in physical appearance between photographs of Jessie and Conrad's descriptions of Winnie. The fact that, during the composition of the novel, Jessie was bearing a child which Conrad did not want may also, Professor Sherry believes, have influenced Conrad's choice of a fictional situation in which maternal passion actually leads to the murder of the husband rather than merely forming an emotional threat. In fact, this point about the connection between Winnie's passion and the Conrads' domestic life has been made before in Bernard Meyer's psychoanalytic biography of Conrad⁷ (which Professor Sherry does not mention). Nevertheless, it is Professor Sherry who pieces together so much evidence from Jessie Conrad and other sources as to make the connection seem irresistible.

As its major sources *The Secret Agent* thus combines detailed factual information that Conrad obtained primarily from "underground" written sources and material derived either consciously or unconsciously from his own marital experiences. The written and personal sources for *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo* are of a very different kind. *Heart of Darkness*, for example, is a highly selective and highlighted version of Conrad's own adventures in the Congo, with some minor additions of details from newspaper accounts of Stanley's speeches. As in *The Secret Agent*, exaggeration plays an important part in the fictional technique, but in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad exaggerates the experience itself: his own frustration

at achieving only limited command of a vessel on the river is transformed into Marlowe's command of the steamer on her entire journey upriver, while Stanley Falls, as the Inner Station, is described as being far more primitive than it was at the time of Conrad's visit. Similarly, to contribute to what Conrad saw as the "sinister resonance"⁸ of the story, the isolation and decay of Kurtz/Klein's grave is exaggerated.

Unlike either *Heart of Darkness* or *The Secret Agent*, *Nostromo* does not rely on the distortion of fact. On the contrary, *Nostromo* seems to reproduce both facts and their significance so faithfully that Conrad's account of the history of his imaginary Latin-American republic manages to reflect accurately all of the most important tendencies in South American history. As a whole the novel is a composite adaptation of innumerable precise details which Conrad gathered from reading a few books about South America, particularly (as a number of investigators have already shown) Masterman's *Seven Eventful Years in Paraguay*, Eastwick's *Venezuela*, and the South American passages in Dumas' biography of Garibaldi. The novel's ideas, characters, incidents, even at times its phrasing, all are based in one way or another on ascertainable facts about South America; even the geographical details are made up of hints of places and place-names from all over the continent.

The character and experiences of Viola, the anachronistic revolutionary nationalist, are a typical example of how Conrad accumulates detail from various factual sources to create an emotionally coherent picture. Professor Sherry very plausibly suggests that Viola is based in the first instance on a man called Enrique Clerici, who appears in Cunninghame Graham's *Thirteen Stories*, and of whom of course, Conrad may have heard directly from his friend. From Enrique Clerici Conrad seems to have drawn both the basic idea of a quick-tempered Italian innkeeper in South America and the specific suggestion of Viola's fanatical semi-religious adoration of Garibaldi. Other important details about Viola are formed from various incidents in Garibaldi's life, while Viola's physical appearance and much of his character—such as his great courage and his stern refusals of financial reward—seem to be founded on Garibaldi himself as an old man. Thus (as with nearly all the characters in this novel), the feeling of emotional and historical fidelity that one senses in the characterisation of Viola comes in part from Conrad's mosaic-like re-arrangement and combination of innumerable actual details.

According to Professor Sherry, then, Conrad's characteristically dense and detailed works are created in a composite manner from a great variety of personal experiences and public facts. Unfortunately Professor Sherry has little to say about a third type of source, that derived from Conrad's knowledge and adaptation of other novels. There is certainly good reason to suspect that Conrad's complex novels are more than the imaginative transmutation of fact. It has been accepted for some time, for example, that the plot of *Under Western Eyes* owes a substantial

debt to Dostoievski's *Crime and Punishment*; more recently, Lawrence Graver⁹ convincingly demonstrated the way in which Maupassant, Daudet, Flaubert and Kipling influenced both the overall conceptions and the details of some of Conrad's short stories. Such influences in works that Professor Sherry does not consider inevitably raises one's curiosity about the extent to which, in the novels that Professor Sherry does examine, Conrad may be using fiction to make fiction.

The Secret Agent, for example, bears interesting similarities to, and may very well be influenced by, at least three other novels, Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima*, Turgenev's *Fathers and Children*, and Dostoievski's *The Possessed*. *The Princess Casamassima* is the only previous English novel to deal with the same subject-matter as *The Secret Agent*, and the two works share some important elements in their conception and presentation of anarchist activity. Both James and Conrad give lengthy examples of the anarchists' attachment to conspiracy, of their addiction toward long theoretical talks, and of their emphasis upon propaganda and symbolic acts of violence. Both novelists also recognise and comment ironically and at length upon the desires of the upper and middle classes to involve themselves in anarchist activities. Finally, both novels are deeply concerned with the reasons for, and the implications of, an attraction toward anarchism in general and nihilism in particular; and James and Conrad alike end their works with the idea of suicide as the chosen way out of the dilemma posed by the anarchists' effect on private life. Since Conrad knew and admired James's novel, then, these remarkable similarities between *The Princess Casamassima* and *The Secret Agent* suggest that James's selection of details was one source for Conrad's own account of anarchism.

For the heavy—perhaps even heavy-handed—irony with which Conrad treats the anarchists in *The Secret Agent*, however, there is no real precedent in James, who is rather more detached in his presentation. A very suggestive source for Conrad's attitude here lies in Dostoievski's *The Possessed*, which, like *The Secret Agent*, is basically concerned with the impact of anarchist betrayals on private lives. Conrad's reaction to the novels of Dostoievski is a complicated problem: although he intensely hated the Russian writer, he knew his work well, and *Crime and Punishment* substantially influenced the conception, the characterisation, the plotting, the tone, and even the phrasing of *Under Western Eyes*. Moreover, Conrad shared Dostoievski's obsessive interest both in underground political movements and in madness (to say nothing of their mutual fascination with the connection between the two). The possibility is at least open, then, that *The Possessed* may have been a source for such aspects of *The Secret Agent* as the conception and portrayal of the idiot Stevie and the emphasis upon the gross incapacity of the anarchists to achieve anything except gratuitous violence. Even more importantly, Conrad seems to have adopted Dostoievski's attitude of denying any humanity in the characters of most of the anarchists, so that they emerge as moral and political caricatures.

Conrad's most extreme anarchist, The Professor, however, seems to have no

source in either Dostoevski or James. Professor Sherry suggests that the personality of The Professor is derived basically from the description of "ego-mania" in Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, while many of his ideas and activities may be found in anarchist literature: his attitude toward the law and his glorification of dynamite as a means of political change, for example, represent views actually held by certain nihilists. But why should Conrad treat such a man with a respect and seriousness wholly absent from the other anarchists in the novel? Professor Sherry offers us no explanation. There are, however, some remarkable similarities between Conrad's attitude towards the Professor and Turgenev's attitude towards the nihilist in *Fathers and Children*; and a partial explanation of Conrad's seemingly aberrant attitude may be found in the possibility that the Professor has a literary source in Bazarov.

In *Fathers and Children* we find, for the first time in fiction, the rebel who conceives of his ideal in terms of destruction and negation, who accepts no principle or authority on faith, and who asserts the total validity of his own desires and perceptions against any demands made by society or the state. Turgenev's attitude toward Bazarov was the subject of much controversy at the time the novel was published, and has been so ever since. Regardless of whether Turgenev agreed with the position represented by his character, however, the fact remains that he treats Bazarov both seriously and sympathetically as an idealistic potential destroyer of the society around him. Similarly, in *The Secret Agent* there is a sense of respect for the Professor's fanatical idealism combined with a recognition of the seriousness of his potential destructive power; Conrad even uses the same words of the Professor that Turgenev had applied to the nihilists in his novel, that he "was a force".¹⁰ It seems more than possible, then, that Conrad did have Turgenev in mind during the writing of *The Secret Agent*, and that some of his attitude towards the Professor was shaped by the reading of *Fathers and Children*, which he knew and admired.

Professor Sherry's account of Conrad's sources is flawed by more than his omission of these and many other possible literary sources. I have serious reservations, for example, about his hypothesis that "it was precisely in those subjects where [Conrad] was farthest from his own basic experience that he succeeded most".¹¹ Certainly there is some limited evidence to support this position. *The Arrow of Gold*, for example, is based upon a transparent re-working of certain incidents in Conrad's own past, and is clearly inferior to *Nostromo*, where Conrad's direct experience was limited to a few days' visit to South America.

The trouble is that a different selection of examples supports the reverse argument. Conrad's attempts at historical fiction in *Suspense* and *The Rover*, where the plotting and all the major details were the result of his own research rather than of his experience, are generally acknowledged to be failures. On the other hand, *Heart of Darkness*, which is (as Professor Sherry himself exhaustively

demonstrates) fundamentally an exaggerated reflection of Conrad's personal experience in the Congo, is one of his most effective works.

The Secret Agent also contradicts the hypothesis that "it was precisely in those subjects where he was farthest from his own experience that he succeeded most". It is true that the descriptions of the anarchists are not the result of Conrad's direct experience. The presentation of Winnie, however, appears to stem from Conrad's perception of his wife, while the evocative picture of London, which is one of the strengths of the novel, is unquestionably the result of his personal experience; in the Author's Preface to the novel, Conrad writes, "I had to fight hard to keep at arms length the memories of my solitary walks all over London in my early days, lest they should rush in and overwhelm each page of the story."¹² So, the general idea that Conrad's works are more successful the farther away they move from his own experience doesn't go very far as an explanation of the relationship between Conrad's use of sources and the final quality of his work.

If we thus reject Professor Sherry's explanation of Conrad's creative process, what then are the determining factors in Conrad's transformation of fact into fiction? Conrad's novels are typically built up in a composite mosaic from actual facts; he rarely if ever seems to have invented either his characters or his plots, and, thanks to Professor Sherry, it is now possible to see exactly what facts went into the making of certain novels. The process by which the facts became fiction, however, is complicated by the literary influences that operate upon the novels: in *The Secret Agent*, for instance, James, Dostoevski, and Turgenev each in turn provided Conrad with adaptable examples of fictional technique applied to the disparate facts of anarchism.

There is, then, no simple pattern to the processes by which Conrad created his complex novels. Even the most complete account of his literary and factual sources would not be able to account for, say, the unsatisfactory treatment of the anarchist/betrayal theme of "The Informer", while basically the same material from the same sources succeeds so brilliantly in *The Secret Agent*. In the end, Professor Sherry's years of detective work have paradoxically increased rather than diminished the mystery of Conrad's creative process.

NOTES

1. *New York Times*, August 24, 1901.
2. *Lord Jim*, London: Dent, 1947, p. 180. All subsequent references to Conrad's works are to this collected edition, published 1946-1955.
3. *A Personal Record*, pp. xix-xx.
4. *Conrad's Western World*, Cambridge: University Press, 1971.
5. *The Secret Agent*, p. 153.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
7. *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography*, Princeton: University Press, 1967.

8. Author's Note to *Youth*, p. vii.
9. *Conrad's Short Fiction*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
10. *The Secret Agent*, p. 311: *Fathers and Children*, translated by Constance Garnett, London: Heinemann, 1906, p. 89.
11. *Conrad's Western World*, p. 3.
12. *The Secret Agent*, p. xiii.

WYNDHAM LEWIS AND THE SANCTIMONIOUS ICE-BOX

Rowland Smith

Wyndham Lewis in Canada. Edited by George Woodcock. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Publications Centre, 1971. Pp. vii, 110. \$4.00.

Wyndham Lewis in Canada is a fascinating volume. It consists of a series of essays previously published in *Canadian Literature*; most, but not all, in No. 35, the issue devoted to Lewis's Canadian experiences. The introduction by Julian Symons was written specially for this collection. There are critical essays, personal recollections, a memoir by Lewis's wife on their sojourn in "The Hotel" (the model for the Hotel Blundell in *Self Condemned*), and three pieces by Lewis himself. These are: "Hill 100: Outline for an Unwritten Novel", "On Canada", and "Nature's Place in Canadian Culture". The contributors include Hugh Kenner, George Woodcock, W. K. Rose, and C. J. Fox. The volume is attractively designed, pleasingly printed, and completely absorbing.

In its one hundred and ten pages, the editor has assembled a range of writing which not only gives a satisfying sense of "covering" Lewis's stay in Canada from late 1940 to 1945, but also shows consistent good taste and intelligence. The essays "fill in" various aspects of an unhappy period in Lewis's life. At the same time, the critical perceptions of the essayists are particularly sharp and poised. As is so often the case with occasional criticism, the short comments embodied in some of